

A House of Mystery

OR, THE GIRL IN BLUE

CHAPTER V.—(Continued).

"But there has been a terrible crime—a double crime committed," I protested. "Surely the police should know!"

"No; all knowledge must be kept from them," she answered decisively. "I wish you to understand me perfectly from the outset. I have sought you here in order to rescue you from this place, because you have unwittingly fallen the victim of a most dastardly plot. You are blind, defenceless, helpless, therefore all who have not hearts of stone must have compassion upon you. Yet if I rescue you, and allow you to go forth again into the world you may, if you make a statement to the police, be the means of bringing upon me a catastrophe, dire and complete."

Every word of hers showed that guilt was upon her. Had I not heard the swish of her skirts as she crept from the room after striking down that unknown man so swiftly and silently that he died without a word?

"And if I promise to remain mute?" I queried, feeling annoyed that she should thus impose upon me such a harassing condition.

"If you promise," she said, "I will accept it only on one further condition."

"And what's that?"

"One which I know you will have some hesitation in accepting; yet, like the first, it is absolutely imperative."

Her voice showed traces of extreme anxiety, and the slim hand upon my arm trembled.

"She was young, I knew, but was she beautiful? I felt instinctively that she was, and conjured up within myself a vision of a refined face, perfect in its tragic beauty, like that of Van Dyck's Madonna that I had seen in the Pitti Palace at Florence in those well-remembered days when I looked upon the world, and it had given me such pleasure."

"Your words are very puzzling," I said gravely. "Tell me what it is that you would have me do."

"It is not difficult," she answered, "yet the curious character of my request will, I feel, cause you to hold back with a natural caution. It will sound strange; nevertheless, here, before I put the suggestion before you, I give you my word of honor, as a woman who fears her God, that no undue advantage shall be taken of your promise."

"Well, explain what you mean."

"The condition impose upon you in return for my assistance," she said, in deepest earnestness, "is that you shall promise to render assistance to a person who will ever remain unknown to you. Any requests made to you will be by letter bearing the signature A-V-E-I, and these instructions you must promise to obey without seeking to discover either motive or reason. The latter can never be made plain to you, therefore do not puzzle yourself unnecessarily over them, for it will be all to no purpose. The secret—for secret there is, of course—will be so well guarded that it can never be exposed, therefore if you consent to thus rendering me a personal assistance in return for your life, it will be necessary to act blindly and carry out to the letter whatever instructions you receive, no matter how remarkable or how illogical they may seem. Do you agree?"

"Well," I said hesitatingly, "your request is indeed a most extraordinary one. If I promise, what safeguard have I for my own interests?"

"Sometimes you may, of course, be compelled to act against your own inclinations," she admitted. "I, however, can only assure you that if you make this promise I will constitute myself your protectress, and at the same time give you solemn assurance that no request contained in the letters of which I have spoken will be of such a character as to cause you to commit any offence against the law."

"Then it is you yourself who will be my anonymous correspondent?" I observed quickly.

"Ah, no!" she answered. "That is, of course, the natural conclusion; but I may as well at once assure you that such will not be the case." Then she added, "I merely ask you to accept or decline. If the former, I will ever be at your service, although we must never meet again after to-day; if the latter, then I will wish you adieu, and the terrible fate your unknown enemies have prepared for you must be allowed to take effect."

"But I should be drowned!" I exclaimed in alarm. "Surely you will not abandon me!"

"Not if you will consent to ally yourself with me."

"For evil?" I suggested very dubiously.

"No, for good," she answered. "I require your silence, and I desire that you should render assistance to one who is solely in need of a friend."

"Financial aid?"

"No, finance has nothing to do with it. The unknown person has money, and to spare. It is a devoted personal assistance and obedience that is required."

"But how can one be devoted to a person one has never seen nor known?" I queried, for her words had increased the misery. Her request was more remarkable than any I had hitherto heard of.

The shrewd suspicion grew upon me that this curious effort to secure my silence was because of her own guilt; that she intended to bind me to a compact in her own nefarious interests.

"I am quite well aware of the strangeness of the conditions I am imposing upon you, but they are necessary."

"And if I accept them will the mystery of to-night ever be explained?" I inquired, eager to learn the truth.

"Of that I know not," she answered vaguely. "Your silence is required to preserve the secret."

"But tell me," I said quickly, "how many persons were there present in that house beside yourself?"

"No, no!" she ejaculated in a tone of horror. "Make no further inquiry. Try and forget all—everything—as I shall try and forget. You cannot know—you will never know—therefore it is utterly useless to seek to learn the truth."

"And may I not even know your identity?" I inquired, putting forth my hand until it rested upon her well-formed shoulder. "May I not touch your face, so as to give me an impression of your personal appearance?"

She laughed at what, of course, must have seemed to her a rather amusing request.

"Give me permission to do this," I urged. "If there is to be mutual trust between us it is only fair that I should know whether you are young or old."

"She hesitated. I felt her hand trembling.

"Remember, I cannot see you," I went on. "By touch I can convey to my mind an impression of the contour of your features, and thus know with whom I am dealing."

"Very well," she said at last. "You have my permission."

Then, eagerly, with both my hands, I touched her face, while she stood rigid and motionless as a statue. I could feel by the contraction of the muscles that this action of mine amused her, and that she was laughing.

Her skin was soft as velvet, her lashes long, her features regular and finely cut, like those of some old cameo. Her hair was dressed plainly, and she had about her shoulders a large cape of rich fur—sable I believed it to be. There was no doubt she was young, perhaps not more than twenty-one or so, and certainly she was very handsome of countenance, and dressed with an elegance quite unusual.

Her mouth was small, her chin pointed, and her cheeks with a firm contour which spoke of health and happiness. As I carefully passed my hands backwards and forwards, obtaining a fresh mental impression with each movement, she laughed outright.

Of a sudden, however, she sprang aside quickly, and left me grasping at air.

"Ah!" she cried, wildly horrified at a sudden discovery. "There is blood upon your hands—his blood!"

"I had forgotten," I apologized quickly. "Forgive me; I cannot see, and was not aware that my hands were unclean."

"It's too terrible," she gasped hoarsely. "You have placed those stained hands upon my face, as though to taunt me."

"With what?" I inquired, breathlessly interested.

But she did not reply. She only held her breath, while her heart beat quickly, and by her silence I felt convinced that by her involuntary ejaculation she had nearly betrayed herself.

The sole question which occupied my thoughts at that moment was whether she was not the actual assassin. I forgot my own critical position. I recollected not the remarkable adventures that had befallen me that night. I thought not of the ghastly fate prepared for me by my unknown enemies. All my thoughts were concentrated upon the one problem—the innocence or guilt of that unseen, soft-spoken woman before me.

"And now," she said at last—"now that you have satisfied yourself of my personal appearance, are you prepared to accept the conditions?"

"I confess to having some hesitation in doing so," I answered, quite frankly. "That is not at all surprising—But the very fact of your own defencelessness should cause you to ally yourself with one who has shown herself to be your protectress, and seeks to remain your friend."

"What motive can you possibly have for thus endeavoring to ally yourself

with me?" I inquired, without attempting to disguise my suspicion.

"A secret one."

"For your own ends, of course?"

"Not exactly. It is to our mutual interests. By my own action in taking you in when you were knocked down by the cab I have placed your life in serious jeopardy; therefore, it is only just that I should now seek to rescue you. Yet if I do so without first obtaining your promise of silence and of assistance, I may, for aught I know, bring an overwhelming catastrophe upon myself."

"You assure me, upon your honor as a woman, that no harm shall befall me if I carry out the instructions in those mysterious letters?"

"If you obey without seeking to elucidate their mystery, or the identity of their sender, no harm shall come to you," she answered solemnly.

"And regarding the silence which you seek to impose upon me? May I not explain my adventures to my friend, in order to account for the blood upon my clothes and the injury to my head?"

"Only if you find it actually necessary. Recollect, however, that no statement whatever must be made to the police. You must give an undertaking never to divulge to them one single word of what occurred last night."

There was a dead silence, broken only by the lapping of the water, which had already risen and had flooded the chamber to the depth of about two inches. The place was a veritable death-trap, for, being a kind of collar and below high-water mark, the Thames flood entered by a hole near the floor too small to permit the escape of a man, and would rise until it reached the roof.

"Come," she urged at last. "Give me your undertaking, and let us at once get away from this horrible place."

I remained silent. Anxious to escape and save my life, I nevertheless entertained deep suspicions of her, because of her anxiety that I should give no information to the police. She had drawn back in horror at the sight of the blood of the murdered man! Had she not by her hesitation admitted her own guilt?

"You don't trust me," she observed, with an air of bitter reproach.

"No," I answered, very bluntly; "I do not."

"You are at least plain and outspoken," she responded. "But as our interests are mutual, I surely may presume to advise you to accept the conditions. Life is better than death, even though one may be blind."

"And you hold back from me the chance to escape from this slow but inevitable fate unless I conform to your wishes?"

"I do."

"Such action as yours cannot inspire confidence."

"I am impelled by circumstances beyond my own control," she answered, with a momentary touch of sadness. "If you knew the truth you certainly would not hesitate."

"Will you not tell me your name?"

"No. It is useless."

"At least, you can so far confide in me as to tell me your Christian name," I said.

"Edna."

"And you refuse your surname?"

"I do so under compulsion."

The water had by this time risen rapidly. My legs had become benumbed, for it now reached nearly to my knees.

"Why do you longer hesitate?" she went on. "Give me your word that you will render the assistance I require, and we will at once escape. Let us lose no time. All this seems strange to you, I know; but some day, when you learn the real reason, you will thank me rather than think ill of my present actions."

Her determination was, I saw plainly, the outcome of some terror which held her fettered, and I knew that, in order to save myself, I must give her the promise she had so persistently desired to extract from me.

Therefore, with sudden determination, prompted more by the natural instinct of self-preservation than by any desire to assist her, I gave her my bond of secrecy.

Again she sighed deeply, as though released of some oppressive weight by my words. Then her hair is closed in mutual trust, and without further word she led me to the opposite side of the noisome cellar into which my enemies had cast me.

"You shall never regret this decision," she assured me in a strained voice, trembling with emotion—"never, never!"

And with a sudden movement she raised my hand and touched it lightly with her dry, fevered lips.

CHAPTER VI.

This impulsive action of hers was as though she were deeply indebted to me. I stood motionless in wonderment.

But only for an instant. She left my side for a moment, and from the sound that escaped her lips appeared to be struggling to open some means of egress from the place.

"Remain where you are," she said, "and I will return to you in a moment. The way out is rather difficult, and I shall be compelled to assist you." Her voice sounded above me, as though she had somehow climbed to the roof of the place.

I heard the drawing of a bell and the clang of iron, then she climbed down again to where I anxiously awaited her. The river flood had risen alarmingly, and was still entering rapidly.

"Come, let me guide you," she said,

taking my arm and leading me to the wall. "Lift your foot, so!" and taking my foot, she placed it in a kind of narrow step in the rough stone wall, at the same time placing my hand upon a piece of iron that seemed to be a large nail driven into the masonry. "Now climb very carefully," she went on. "You will find the other footholds if you seek them."

Without hesitation, I raised myself from the ground slowly, with infinite care commenced to scale the wall, while she remained below, wading almost up to her waist in water.

"Take care that you don't strike your head," she cried warningly. "Above you is a small hole just large enough for you to get through. Be very careful, and take your time."

The one hand at liberty I stretched above my head, and found, as she described, a square hole in the roof of the place, and, grasping the stone, I eventually managed to escape through it, finding myself at last standing upon a boarded floor.

I feared to move, not knowing what pitfalls might be there, but I heard the voice of my rescuer far below, asking if I were all right, and to her I replied in the affirmative.

A few moments later she was again at my side, and by the clang of iron I knew that the aperture of that fatal place was closed again.

I inquired of her where we were, but she only replied—

"I've already explained to you that to seek to elucidate the mystery of these adventures of yours is entirely useless. We have promised to each other mutual faith. That is, in itself, sufficient."

Then, taking my arm, she hurriedly led me across the room, up some steps, and along two long passages that ran at right angles to each other, until at length we emerged into the street.

Where we were I had not the slightest idea. I only knew that we were beside the river-bank, for upon my ears there fell the shrill whistle of a steam-tug, and I could distinguish the sound of various factories and the running of steam-cranes.

With her arm linked in mine, and heedless of the water dripping from her skirts, this unseen woman to whom I had promised absolute obedience and assistance with a view to myself fathom the mystery, led me forward through a number of narrow turnings, until by the bustle about me I knew that we must have reached a main road.

I heard the approaching jingle of a cable-bell, and the vehicle, at her demand, pulled up at the kerb.

"We must now part," she said, in a low, earnest voice. "Remember that in this remarkable affair our interests are absolutely identical. Any order that you receive you will obey without seeking to discover the why or wherefore, and above all, silence to the police."

"I have promised," I answered, for want of something better to say.

"And whatever may occur in the future, recollect that I am still your protectress, as I have been to-day. I have forced you to your promise, but for that I ask your forgiveness, because it is essential, if—"

"If what?" I inquired, with quick interest.

"If the mystery is ever to be solved. Are you, too, seeking the truth?"

"Yes," she responded. "But we must not talk here. The condition of our clothes is attracting attention."

"I shall think always of the mysterious Edna who refuses all information," I laughed.

"And I, too, shall not easily forget you—and all I owe to you. Farewell."

Her soft hand grasped mine for an instant, that same cool hand that had soothed my brow. Afterwards she assisted me into the cab.

(To be Continued.)

ON THE FARM.

BAD FLAVORS IN CHEESE.

A common cause of bad flavors in cheese is contamination of dairy utensils. Probably more trouble is caused by unclean utensils than in any other way, as milk and its products is a most favorable medium for the development of all kinds of germ-life. Vessels of all kinds that come in contact with milk at once become infected with bacteria. They become lodged in the cracks and crevices and seams of cans, pails, dippers, and strainers. If these utensils are not thoroughly cleansed and scalded immediately after being used, they will soon become filthy and foul-smelling, writes U. J. Kuneman.

Every thing coming in contact with milk should be thoroughly washed with hot water after being rinsed out first with lukewarm water. Some washing preparations should be employed and a brush instead of a rag should be used. Then they should be scalded and put out in the sun and pure air and left there until required again. Old or rusty cans or pails should not be used at all as many of the worst flavors come from this source, on account of not being able to cleanse them properly.

Another source of trouble is the returning of whey in the cans, many of the whey tanks are never cleansed nor are they ever emptied from one end of the season to the other. Consequently there is a foul smelling mass which is only aggravated by the addition of a

fresh lot every day to help to swell and add to the number of undesirable bacteria already present. This filthy, reeking stuff is put into the cans and taken back by the patrons in a great many cases as I have seen for myself, it is left in the cans until they are wanted again, then they are emptied and rinsed out with cold water, and the fresh, warm milk put in. This in its turn becomes contaminated. After all this, some people will expect the makers to accept such milk and make good cheese from it. If they do not they get the blame for it.

Again, perhaps, certain bacteria are present only in one or a few patrons' milk. These are not destroyed by the temperature employed in the ordinary process of making. After being mixed with the whole lot of whey in the tank they become distributed through the milk of all the patrons supplying the factory. If these cans are not thoroughly washed at once it will spread among all the patrons and in this way all the milk will become contaminated through the medium of the whey. The best way to overcome this difficulty is to thoroughly wash the tank at least three times a week and by scalding the whey. There are several advantages to be gained by so doing, viz.: It will increase the value of the whey for feed; there will be a saving in cans as they will last longer; they will be easier to clean as the acid content is much less; the fat will not come to the surface, but will be held in suspension.

The cans besides being easier to clean will smell much sweeter. Again, the chances of contaminating the cans are less and those flavors which appear to grow in sour whey will be prevented from spreading among the other patrons. It will take very little more fuel to heat the whey to about 160 degrees and the increased value would more than repay for the extra expense. The patrons would be well repayed even if they had to pay the maker for the difference which should amount to not more than \$1.00 each.

There is one way at our disposal as regards the improvement of milk delivered to the factories. That is by paying for it by the fat system, or fat and casein system. By this system there is greater encouragement for a patron to deliver his milk in a better condition, for he knows by so doing he is going to get what it is worth, it pays him for the extra care.

EARLY SHEARING.

To many it may appear unreasonable to write about sheep shearing, while chilly winds are blowing and heaps of snow are yet in sight, but there are generally some rainy days in April, when the rams, the last year's lambs, in good condition, and ewes that are not due to lamb till on in May, may be safely shorn, and will be the better for it. Nearly all the most successful breeders of sheep now make it a rule to shear at least a part of the flock in March or April. Some of the advantages are that sheep that are in good flesh thrive better in the warm days of spring relieved of their winter coats, while the new wool grows rapidly, ensuring a heavier fleece for next year. Ticks and lice, if present, are more readily got rid of, and the work is done at a time when other farm work is not pressing.

The objection may be raised that the difference in the market price of washed and unwashed wool is so great that there may be a considerable loss from shearing unwashed. In answer to this, it may be said that if the difference is not more than one third there is little if any loss, as the greater weight of the unwashed nearly makes up for the difference in price. And we claim that buyers, as a rule, take an unfair advantage in making the discount greater than one-third, though the thrifty flockmaker will not hesitate on that account to shear early and unwashed, knowing from experience that the comfort and thrift of his sheep, and the increased growth of new blood, will more than make up for the apparent loss in the sale of the fleece, and his flock will make a much better showing with their fuller fleeces in the fall when sales are principally made. There is always some risk to the health of the men and the sheep in river washing, and some risk of loss from the sheep being cast on their backs in the warm spring days while reaching to bits at tormenting ticks, though with proper treatment, dipping in spring and fall, there should be practically no ticks. While we strongly advocate early shearing of young sheep in really good condition, we would just as strongly advise against shearing thin young sheep or breeding ewes early in April, unless they are either blanketed or kept in a warm place for a week or two after, but those in good condition will not suffer if kept within closed doors and free from drafts for 2 or 3 days. We have seen sheep shorn in January in Ontario, and with no ill effect, but of course they were kept for a while in warm basement stables after being stripped of their fleeces. As a rule, where the sheep are kept in good condition the entire flock may be shorn before going to grass. A rainy day may be utilized for the purpose of shearing, and the flock, lambs and all, dipped for the destruction of ticks on a day when the land is too wet for seeding operations, or other work on the farm.

Good doctors know better when they see an improvement in their patients. Some women would stop to rubber when they have something on the stove cooking.